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Development of Common Ideals in the British Commonwealth

By

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DEVELOPMENT OF COMMON IDEALS IN THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH

In dealing with the development of common ideals in the British Commonwealth, it is essential to come to grips with the facts of the present situation in relation to World events.

The British Commonwealth is based on monarchy as the centre of unity. It is generally granted that in such a far flung organisation a centre of legal as well as emotional unity has to be provided. A leader has been such a centre in various countries and stages of development. In Russia, the outstanding idea of the revolution, its leader and his successor have together contributed to build up a potent tradition. Americans appear to be able to build up unity on the basis of their Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The British Commonwealth, so far, has relied on monarchy as the legal and psychological link between the various Dominions. Long ago George Washington asserted that influence is not Government. But so far as one can see, it is solely influence and not Government that holds the British Dominions together today. It has been argued that the monarchical system is snobbish or undemocratic, but it has worked. We in India can realise the significance of such a link perhaps theoretically weak but really effective. But in ultimate analysis it is true that the Dominions, for all practical purposes, have become independent; and even under the impact of the present war, have continued to remain independent. They were at liberty to make peace or war or to be neutral in the curious sense in which Ireland is neutral. They have established economic freedom. They can exclude Chinese or Indians or even the English. In these matters they are ahead even of American practice. Under American law, businessmen were bound to send their cargoes let us say, from Hawaii by American ships and American ports and they could not use Dutch or British Shipping facilities. The Dominions very early asserted their right to such a status. After the failure of the American experiment and before the middle of the nineteenth century, those colonies which had

predominantly European populations were progressively freed from the so-called imperial control. The right of disposal of public lands, the imposition of tariffs and increasing freedom in all economic matters preceded the war of 1914. The Dominions entered the League of Nations as independent Units and by 1931, Dominion Status became equivalent to practical independence and there was no power which an independent State could exercise which a Dominion could not wield. So much so was this the case that the Ottawa Conference of 1932 was largely forced upon England by the Dominions. When the present war broke out, one Dominion, Ireland, decided to be neutral and South Africa very nearly did the same. But, in the main, the Dominions participated in a war which, at the time it began, did not seem to concern them. Dominion Status was thus vindicated. But as very acutely pointed out by Professor Brogan, Dominion Status, although a great invention, has left many questions undecided. The Dominions, as a matter of fact, could have pursued independent and most inconvenient foreign policies though in reality they did not do so. In truth, as more than one writer has noted, the British Commonwealth bears heavy strains, but is not quite so able to bear light strains. In the language of one of them, Australians and Canadians may die for their Empire, but will not easily adjust their tariff or emigration policies for the benefit of the Empire as a whole. On the other hand, while the Dominions have insisted on political independence, internal and external, they have not till recently felt it incumbent on them to incur the responsibilities of independence and Australia was nearly caught out when Japan declared war.

Speaking generally, the British Empire, in the old sense, must be regarded as no longer a practicable proposition. However benevolent and disinterested Great Britain was, the American war of Independence showed that she was in danger of being stigmatised as tyrannical when she endeavoured to impose her will even on men of her own race. After the South African war, many thought that it was an extremely foolish venture on the part of England to extend Dominion Status to the Dutch but the results have more than justified the expectations of the optimists. In the memorandum adopted

by the Conference on Inter-Imperial Relations in 1926, it was declared that the British Empire defies classification and bears no real resemblance to any other political organisation which now exists or has been tried. After the Statute of Westminster of 1931, this statement held good even more definitely. The exact position of the Sovereign and the right to secede were matters of great controversy before the present war and, in the language of J. A. Spender in his "Government of Mankind," "The British Commonwealth is a League of Nations without sanctions and the members stand or fall as a voluntary association bound together by tradition, sentiment and self-interest. No compulsion could make it succeed if good will were lacking; any attempt to apply compulsion would be fatal to good will." If India is to be brought into the orbit of Dominion Status, these points should be remembered and implemented. The sentiment in favour of Dominion Status has sedulously to be cultivated and cherished and it can be so cultivated only if the consciousness of equality and equal opportunity can be continuously maintained throughout the areas concerned. It must not be forgotten that unless the motive of self-interest also operates, such links are apt to be weak and therefore India must feel that in her own interests, it would be well to remain within the ambit of Dominion Status. As a necessary concomitant a self-governing constitution has to be brought into existence which will alone give her an absolutely equal status compared with the other self-governing Dominions.

In coming to a conclusion as to whether India should remain within or without the circle of the Dominions or whether she should become an independent country, let us not ignore the following considerations:—Already there is talk of a World Council controlled by the Great Powers. At the present moment, the Powers that are named as Great Powers are Britain, the Soviet Union, China and the United States. It is still a matter of controversy, despite General Smuts, whether France will come within or remain without this charmed circle. It has also been seriously suggested that China might drop out of this circle and disturbing tendencies and candid discussions are already noticeable. Talks are now taking place as to the feasibility of organising these

Great Powers as an executive Body to act as the Policemen of Peace. Persons have not been slow to point out the danger of the alliance of the great powers transforming itself into what Barbara Ward termed "an international share-out" and into spheres of influence or zones of security. In fact, Mr. Walter Lippmann, the famous American journalist and author has suggested an Atlantic Community, a Russian Orbit and a Chinese Strategic System. There is not only the risk that these great powers may exercise drastic powers within their own spheres but may very soon quarrel and clash *inter se*. Whether any purely military alliance will last is a matter of speculation. For myself, I agree with those who see no solution excepting in a World Union of all Nations practically in perpetual session. To assert such a possibility is perhaps to provoke a smile. But every other alternative seems to be doomed to failure sooner or later. What is now taking place in Belgium, in Greece and in Poland, what may happen in Spain, are pointers that cannot be ignored. So long as nations differ as much as they do great divergences of power, and the influence that goes with power, cannot be abolished. The aim of the future should however be not to indulge in impractical dreams of equalising power but to restrict and canalise that power. For, as long as one can look ahead, India will not be one of the great military powers of the World nor do her cultural and spiritual traditions predispose her to tread the path of predatory powers. If and in so far as England can advance the ideals of peace and progress as well as the promotion of complete equality of opportunity amongst the dominions and can make up her mind without hesitation or faltering to shed all traces of a superiority complex born of racial or economic considerations, not only the path of self-interest but the path of harmonious world evolution would lead us to Dominion Status as our goal; but no Dominion Status can be contemplated without the development of common ideals throughout Great Britain and the Dominions commonly shared and commonly implemented.

H. G. Wells, writing on "Subject Peoples" in his deliberately provocative book "The Fate of Homo Sapiens" asserted that Indian nationalism is no sort of synthesis as it is based on a common and understandable resentment at the

British Imperial Government and on very little else. He was good enough to add that "there is much to be said for an Indian nationalism if it be based upon the idea of human brotherhood and the common future of mankind." What Wells has remarked about such a basis and outlook may be applied to every aspect of the problem and every country. Will Dominion Status create a community ready to welcome the conception of a common social objective and an one pointed will co-operating with that objective? Will the world at large and the British Commonwealth Russia and U. S. A. to start with awake to the need of a complete and unified Police control throughout the world designed, in the frank language of H. G. Wells, to repress the financial scramble and gangster violence which constitute the closing phase of the Sovereign State and the private ownership system? On the answer to such a question depends the future of India as a Dominion and I go further and say that on this answer depends the continuance of the British Commonwealth and the possibility of peace upon earth and general good will.

It is impossible to contemplate the reconstruction of the world on the basis of aggressive and conflicting nationalisms. At the end of the last war men and women developed no joint purpose and many of the old ideals of colonial imperialism persisted. Above all, the economic problems of the world were lost sight of. The main cause of the failure of the League of Nations was that its outlook was primarily political and, the world forgot as Wendell Wilkie has reminded us that no nation can reach its fullest development alone. In Wilkie's "One World," it has been shown how America's isolation and detachment from world affairs contributed not a little to the present chaos. The improvement of communications by air, sea and land, the development of the wireless and the general short-circuiting of space and time that has been effected make it impossible for any country to segregate itself. To quote again from Wilkie: "A true world outlook is incompatible with foreign imperialism, no matter how high minded the governing country. It is equally incompatible with the kind of imperialism which can develop inside any nation." One more sentence from the book is worth remembering. "We are learning in this war that it is not racial classifications nor

ethnological consideration which bind men together; it is shared concepts and kindred objectives." So far as India is concerned, side by side with the maintenance of her ancient culture she has been more or less continuously assimilating Western ideas of—nationalism and constitutionalism, and her present political status and her programme for the future are in essence *sui generis*. It is too often taken for granted that the attainment of national independence would solve the entire problem of India. It will not. At the same time, although attempts made in the world to set up international creeds have failed for other reasons, there is no escaping the conclusion that until the national question is settled, the wider international questions that confront a nation cannot be successfully tackled, as was very picturesquely emphasised by Bernard Shaw in his preface to John Bull's "Other Island." The solution, therefore, of the problem of Indian self-government is fundamental and, without such a solution, Dominion Status cannot be envisaged nor world policy as based on such status. In other words, India must be a full fledged Dominion before Dominion Status is considered or discussed.

There is one phrase which is too often used lightly and has played a dominant part in recent debates and is also likely to create great troubles in the solution of future political questions. It is often forgotten that when President Wilson spoke of "self-determination" he was evolving a doctrine which was not in consonance with, but a distinct departure from, the policy of Abraham Lincoln. I am at one with those who contend that one of the great confusing factors in present-day discussions is the bracketing together of the phrases "self-determination" and "self-government." The American writer, Walter Lippmann, to whom a reference has already been made has forcibly reminded us in his latest book entitled "United States' War Aims," that "Hitler invoked the principle of self-determination when he annexed Austria, dismembered Czechoslovakia, attacked Poland, infiltrated Alsace-Lorraine, and conspired against Russia in the Ukraine." The following passage in that penetrating study of Post-war Peace planning is most instructive. "Self-determination rejects the ideal of a State within which diverse peoples find justice and liberty under equal laws and become a commonwealth. Self-

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determination has nothing to do with self-government but has become confused with it. By sanctioning secession it invites majorities and minorities to be intransigent and irreconcilable. There is no need to emphasise its atomization of human society. Within minorities who have seceded there will tend to appear other minorities who will tend to secede." Every word of this is applicable not only to India but to most other countries.

The moral of the human drama that is now being enacted before our eyes is obvious. The result of the Chicago Conference on aerial navigation is an agreement to differ and many such hurdles remain to be surmounted. Where the economic motive operates powerfully, abstract doctrines tend to recede to the background. Those prophets would not only be rash but foolish who would, in the face of happenings in Poland, Greece and Belgium, assert that the collapse of Hitler would be a prelude to an epoch of peace and harmony. In political discussions preceding and during the coming Peace Conference, it is necessary that, whatever our ultimate ideals might be, we should proceed on the basis of the stark realities that face us. The problems of nationalities, the problems of minorities, the problems of racial and colour prejudice, the problems of economic rivalry may, without much warning, produce a conflagration. At the same time, it would be pure shortsightedness even when confronted by these problems, to lose sight of the inevitable interdependence of each part of the world on every other, in the days to come. The progressive annihilation of distances and the conquest of time, apart from every other factor, render it impossible for any country or race to follow a policy of isolation, aloofness or superiority complex. The political or national independence that economists and constitutional historians discoursed upon till recently is rapidly becoming an obsolete idea and no Government today is powerful enough to defy the rest of the world. It is also manifest that the immediate by-product of this war would be the emergence of three States or polities which would occupy supreme positions taking into consideration power, population and resources, namely the British Commonwealth, the Soviet Union and the United States of America, none of them however being able to func-

tion independently of the others. The status of small countries and States throughout the world will necessarily be one of great complexity and delicacy. They will have to be junior partners of one or other of these great powers and enjoy the blessings and be prepared to reconcile themselves to the handicaps attendant upon truncated sovereignties that are only partially able to enforce their will.

Apart from conventional phraseology it cannot be gainsaid that China, although from the point of view of her size, population and potential resources, she may be regarded and spoken of as one of the great powers, will, in practice, be only one of the more influential entities amongst the minor partners. The position of India will be determined with direct reference to similar inescapable postulates. Like China, India's population and her resources, both mental and physical, entitle her to the position of a great power but her economic position and her neglect to catch up even with Canada and Australia in the matter of agriculture, industries, manufactures and shipping have placed her in a position of definite inferiority, and the problem of England being asked to quit India, when analysed, is only of academic significance. Self-government in the sense of India being allowed to solve her own political, social and economic problems, whatever the cost may be, and setting up her own constitution, whatever be the difficulties of such a task, has been long overdue. Its achievement is going to be a task of great magnitude, but cannot be postponed. In the present juncture the problem of Indian self-government is not intrinsically different from the problems which China, Italy, Greece, Poland, Belgium, France, Spain and many other countries have to deal with. The solution in India can be reached only in one of two ways: (a) By Great Britain adopting a policy of complete non-interference with the procedure by which the various communities and groups in India adjust their differences and settle down to a constitution of their own devising after, it may be, undergoing in the process all incidental travails which may include a Civil War. Such a procedure may or may not result (and, in my opinion, will not result) in the establishment of an exact replica of responsible government on the British model. (b) By Great Britain arriving at some decision as to

the formulation of a constitution most suitable to India in her *bona fide* opinion and promulgating it as she did in 1858, 1919 and partially under the Act of 1935. Even after such self-government is attained, India will be only at the threshold of the world polity and proceeding thence she will have to enter the orbit of Great Britain, or the United States or Russia. Whatever theorists may aver India will not, in the next few years, be sufficiently strong to function as a State independently of these three great powers. If so much be granted, there are many reasons for and very few against India electing to be a unit of the British system along with Canada and Australia. To say this is not to under-rate or minimise future difficulties. Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are settlements of white races not all of whom are willing, in practice, whatever their professions might be, to treat brown or black races on a footing of equality. There are possibilities of economic conflicts between India on the one hand and the existing dominions on the other as also between India and England. There are also possibilities of Australia, New Zealand and Canada aligning themselves especially in fiscal and economic affairs more and more with the United States and the economic practices of America. None of these problems, however, will vanish if India declines to be a dominion. On the other hand, they may be accentuated. Considering the question therefore without the importation of sentiment or passion the conclusion is in my opinion irresistible that, fully conscious though she should be of possible handicaps and obstacles, the right course for India to pursue is to choose Dominion Status, at the same time making it clear that the development of her army, her navy, her air forces and the evolution of her social and economic plans would be envisaged primarily in her own interests although Indian policy must be consonant with that regional and international policing and guidance without which humanity will slide into chaos. It is not too much to declare that not otherwise than by including India as a willing partner and conjointly with India developing the common ideals outlined above will the British Commonwealth be an operative factor of World Peace and World Harmony.

